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SUBJECT: BRV DEFENDS COUNTERDRUG EFFORTS; CHAVEZ THREATENS
AMBASSADOR WITH EXPULSION

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary. Senior Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) officials are vigorously defending the BRV's counter-drug efforts and accusing the USG of being complicit in the international drug trade. During his August 31 "Alo, Presidente" broadcast, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez called ONDCP Director Walters a "stupid gringo" and threatened to expel Ambassador Duddy in response to the Ambassador's most recent comments on the need for bilateral counternarcotics cooperation. During a September 1 press conference, Venezuelan Vice President Ramon Carrizalez claimed the BRV interdicts a large percentage of drugs transiting Venezuela and accused the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) of being part of an international drug cartel. Chavez and senior BRV officials appear particularly sensitive to any criticism in the run-up to the November state and local elections and are eager to frame these elections as a confrontation with the "(U.S.) empire" where possible. End Summary.

Ambassador Underscores Need for CN Cooperation

12. (SBU) At a NAS-funded demand reduction baseball clinic in Valencia on August 30, the Ambassador, echoing recent press comments by ONDCP Director John Walters, told local journalists that drug traffickers take advantage of the lack of cooperation between the BRV and U.S. He also noted the four-fold increase in drug trafficking in Venezuela since 2004 and said efforts to renew counternarcotics cooperation have not advanced despite President Chavez's July 5 public overture to the USG, when Chavez expressed interest in renewing anti-drug cooperation. The Ambassador cited support from ten other countries in the region on the issue, and said the BRV and U.S. should continue the fight against trafficking together in order to be more effective. He also said that, despite the lack of cooperation on the drug front, commercial relations remained strong, resulting in over USD 50 billion in bilateral trade.

BRV Responds

13. (SBU) The Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) released an August 31 statement in response to the "hostile

declarations" of U.S. officials on counternarcotics cooperation. The MFA communique claimed significant BRV progress in reducing trafficking since the BRV ceased cooperation with DEA without providing details. The statement asks, "how the United States, capable of sending hundreds of thousands of soldiers to occupy and systematically destroy Iraq and expel hundreds of thousands of Latin American workers is incapable of stopping the flow of drugs..." With respect to the cancelled visit of the ONDCP Director, the MFA communique says the visit would have come at an "inopportune" time, and that he would put his time to better use fighting drugs "in his own country."

¶4. (SBU) Chavez responded to the Ambassador's call for improved cooperation on his weekly television show "Alo, Presidente," by accusing the Ambassador of interfering in Venezuela's domestic affairs. He specifically told the Ambassador to, "watch your words well...we will not permit any meddling," and warned that if the Ambassador does not respect "international conventions," the BRV will expel him. Chavez also criticized the ONDCP Director, stating that he should, "go mind your own business...Stupid gringo." President Chavez used charts he claimed were based on international sources that showed Venezuela was among the top-5 most active countries in counternarcotics seizures since 2006. He repeated assertions that Venezuelan counternarcotics successes had increased since official cooperation with DEA had ended. Chavez also asked the audience how the US had the moral authority to speak about counternarcotics when the largest single crop in the United States was marijuana, while there was no drug production in Venezuela.

¶5. (SBU) BRV Vice President Ramon Carrizalez held a September 1 press conference to defend the BRV's counter-drug efforts and to deflect USG concern over the growing transit

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of illicit drugs through Venezuela. Flanked by Justice and Interior Minister Ramon Rodriguez Chacin and National Anti-Drug Office (ONA) Director Nestor Reverol, Carrizalez stressed that Venezuela is the "victim" caught between the region's largest drug producer, Colombia, and the world's largest market, the United States. Citing UN statistics, Carrizalez asserted that most of Colombia's drugs are exported via the Pacific and claimed the BRV is interdicting a large percentage of drugs transiting Venezuela. He added that the BRV has destroyed 190 clandestine airstrips and jailed more than 4000 drug traffickers.

¶6. (SBU) Carrizalez also accused the USG of being complicit in narcotrafficking. The Venezuelan VP accused DEA of abetting narcotrafficking and argued that "controlled deliveries" of drugs for law enforcement purposes are illegal under Venezuelan law. He said the United States produces USD 35 billion of marijuana annually, making it the country's biggest agricultural cash crop. With respect to the canceled visit of ONDCP Director John Walters, Carrizalez said "Venezuela is no longer a colony" and insisted that visitors are "free to come and go," but meetings with BRV officials must be coordinated via official requests. (Note: Walters and the Embassy made separate written requests for official meetings. Walters and his team were told they would not be issued visas until the meetings were confirmed, which never happened. End Note.)

Comment

¶7. (C) The Ambassador's August 30 comments on the need for counternarcotics cooperation covered no new ground and echoed statements made by senior Washington officials, including the ONDCP Director. Chavez's visceral reaction and the extent to which senior BRV officials have tried to defend Venezuela's counter-drug efforts reflect the BRV's extreme sensitivity to

any criticism, especially in the run-up to state and local elections in November. There are indications that the BRV is concerned about the potential for the loss of key states in the November elections, and thus has turned to its traditional formula - discrediting and demonizing the source of criticism, in this case, the USG. As the November elections draw near, Chavez is once again trying to frame the electoral contest in part as a battle between his base and the "(U.S.) empire." It is also likely that such attacks will continue and escalate as events critical of the BRV unfold over the coming weeks (the TSA public notice, revelations from the Antonini trial in Miami, etc.). End Comment.

DUDDY